"Reaction"

A First World War Poem

by

Edward George Till
Ex Gunner No. 160910 C/75. R.F.A.
England 1919

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Edward George Till.

Edward George Till 1877–1933

The 1881 census shows Edward living in North Street, Havant, with his father, a cab driver, his mother Jane, and his younger brother Bertram. In 1900 Edward married Beatrice Stallard, whose father Charles was a Havant parchment maker, and they had three daughters. Edward was working as a chamois leather dresser before WW1 and he was forty when, as a gunner in the Royal Field Artillery, he was sent to France in December 1917. Records show that Edward was hospitalised twice with influenza before being wounded on 27th September 1918. When putting up a barrage an enemy shell burst close to him and part of it hit his right shoulder. He was operated on in a hospital at Le Tréport and then sent home in the hospital ship *Carisbrook Castle* to the Royal Victoria Hospital at Netley. As he was 20% disabled he was granted a small pension. However, at some stage he was promoted to foreman at Messrs Stent's glove factory in West Street. The family lived at 4 Waterloo Road, Havant, from about 1916, which is where he wrote this moving poem in 1919.

The poem is published as written and with the kind permission of Edward's granddaughter Mrs Vera Nevitt.

"Reaction"

Edward George Till
Ex Gunner No. 160910 C/75. R.F.A.
England 1919

You want to know why I am restless
Tonight as I'm laying in bed
You also ask me the question
Why can't you sleep tonight Ted
That question is easy to answer
It's tired the body may be
But the mind is restless and wanders
Far away. Over the sea

To scenes that will ne'er be forgotten
Scenes of bloodshed and strife
Scenes where the Old Chums have fallen
Giving their all. Their life
Now that the hours are quiet
And darkness reigns over light
My mind see those scenes O so vivid
That's why I can't sleep tonight

You tell me to think of a subject
Something merry and bright
Dont let your thoughts go out yonder
They've been there enough for tonight
I try hard your theory to follow
But hardly before I'm aware
My mind is wandering swiftly
From scene to scene over there.

When you just asked me that question
I was miles and miles away
We had put up a barrage that morning
Then moved up again the same day
There, in our new position
Lying dead just as they fell
Were six of the German soldiers
And no doubt we'd wished them to hell

In life it was all strife between us
Each other we tried to lay low
But that feeling gave way to pity
As we gaze on our fallen foe
Each Sub.* took one of the fallen
To bury. Just under the ground
Though there was no burial service
Our feelings were genuine and sound

D.Sub: Buried one of the Soldiers
In a hole that a shell had made
And over his shattered body
His greatcoat we gently laid
We made a little wooden cross
Inscribed these words and date
An unknown German Soldier
August the second one eight

I think there was someone longing
For him. In his native land
Anxiously, Patiencly waiting
To feel the firm grip of his hand
We found in his tunic pocket
A Photo, no doubt of the one
Who was waiting each day for a letter
From Him. Who's writting was done

She receives an Official letter
He's missing since 2.9.18
What is her thoughts Her feelings
As she prays. She hope's and waits
For the one who is buried out yonder
The one. That will never return.
Perhaps today she is wondering
Of his fate. She will never learn

My mind wanders swiftly onward
And I see another scene,
I am standing In a graveyard
Midst the little mounds of green
It is at Beryles-au-bois
I can see it. O so plain,
The rows of wooden crosses,
The Regiment, number, name

There. Coming down the highway,
Not so very far away
I can see some Scottish Guardsmen
Their thoughts. Ah. Who can say,
They are carrying a Comrade
To his long and final rest,
And as so often happened
He had been. One of the best

I can see again those Pipers
As they play their sad refrain
The pipes sound full of sorrow
Full of anguish, greif and pain
They seem to wail with pity
Just as though they felt the strain
Of the passing of a Comrade
Who would not be seen again

I see again that touching scene
Far away. But yet so near
I can see again those Pipers
Try to hide the droping tear
As they file beside the graveside
As they take their last farewell
Of their Chum who'd fought beside them
A good and staunch Old Pal

Perhaps you think it I was childish
To show their feelings so
But remember out in Flanders
Chum's like that was good to know,
Those men had faced death often
With not. A sign of fear
When over the top was ordered
Then Death. It was very near

That scene I leave behind me
My mind is off once more
I am standing on the Ypre Front
Midst wreckage all galore
O the scene of desolation
The mud. Well, just compare.
What we call mud in England
Is like their dust out there

And as I gaze around me
The scene that meet's my eye
Is one of all distruction
For there it lay close by
The shattered Tanks and Lorries
A smashed up aeroplane
The Limber's, Gun's and Wagon's
All smashed. But not in vain

Its Winnipeg Corner Ypres
January Eleven One eight,
Jerry as found out our Battery
And shells us, at Gun fire rate
F. Sub. The first one's to suffer
A Shell bursts under their Gun
With a flash and a roar that's deafening
The work of that Gun is done

She's picked up just like a feather
Droped. About 12 yards away
Twisted, Warped and Battered
Deep in a Shell hole. She lay
She had been a good old servant
Barked with fury night and day
It just raised the devil in us
Remarks passed. One was. We ll pay

C Sub. was the next one to cop it
Not only is their Gun knocked out
For the place is set all on fire
With live ammunition about
The Gunners first thoughts is to stop it
We fought hard that fire to quail
Knowing well the risk and danger
From a heated bursting shell

Yes. We won. That fire we conqured
At last. It was all put out
But then it was only our duty
So it's nothing to shout about
And when my thoughts go out yonder
I see, all those scenes once again
I say to myself Ted, be thankfull
You're back Home in Blighty again

Three Guns that day they disabled
The Battery, was half knocked out
Still. We had 3 Guns to work with
And fired 18 pound shells about
We had plenty of ammunition
We used it. Those 3 Guns to feed
Old Jerry. Tried hard to smash us
But found out he did'nt succeed

I think of those fallen Comrades
For them. Their life's race had run
May they. On the last day of judgment
Hear Him say Welcome. Well Done
There are some of those little Crosses
On them, it just simply state
The Regiment, name the number
And January, Eleven One eight.

That scene of strife and distruction
Is changed. It is all quietness
I lay between sheet and blanket
In the three two C.C.S.
There, in the bed just beside me
Is a Hun. Perhaps we had tried
To give each other the ticket
As we fought, each for our side

He looked hard at me though uncertain
As if he was trying to know
What was the feeling between us
Was it to be Friend or Foe
He passed me a faded old Photo
Of his Wife and Children dear
I showed him, the one that I carried
Of those, so far yet so near

That settled the question between us
We were Pals in that Central C.S.
The passing of those faded Photo's
Did more than our words could express
His thoughts were for Home. Wife and kiddies
My thoughts, in a similar strain
His words to my words were useless
But the action was simple and plain

When he left that Central C.S.
He gave me a souviner
A peice of his Iron Cross Ribbon
To him. It was precious and dear
Then with a long final handshake
A grip that no words could explain
We parted. The best of old Comrades
Yet perhaps. We were fighting again.

When I look at that peice of ribbon
The peice in the little brass frame
I say to myself. Well old Comrade
I hope you and me are the same
I am Home surrounded with loved ones
I hope youre surrounded as well
At Home. With the Wife and the kiddies
That's the wish of your C.C.S. pal

He fought for his Home and Country
I fought for justice and right
He did as his Country told him
My conscience said go out and fight
He was a genuine German Soldier
I'm sure he will stand the same chance
When we meet on the last day of Judgment
As the Tommie that now lives in Hant's

It is night. The month December
I am on the Wooden Track
Making for our Gun Position
With my pal. My Old Chum Mac.
Hanging on behind the Limber
It is dark. Can hardly see
There's a slip, a splash a scramble
Is it Mac. No. It is me

O by strike, whatever's happened
In a flash I'm on my back
In a Shell hole. Ice and water.
The Limber Wheel Slipped off the Track
Are you hurt no I don't think so
This ere water, is mighty cool
Well I'm d — you in there bathing
What do you think you're at Blackpool.

Where's your hand Right Ho. I've got it
There I stand beside old Mac
With the clothes upon me freezing
Shudders running down my back
Then we get the Limber righted
Feels as though my bones will crack
Off once more we started trudging
Right along the Wooden Track.

We trudge along. Mac is saying
I've just thought perhaps that slip
Will turn out a real good blessing
Perhaps's you've froze the blighters stiff
If you don't do any scratching
When you get down into kip
Let me know, 'Darn me' I'll freeze em
Clothes and all I'll make a slip

The funny side. We always found it.
Kept us going over there
Monday morn till Sunday midnight
Got like that we didn't care
When a shell went whistling or'er us
You would here. That's not for me
Never had my name upon it
Chance gone west for old Blighty.

Were we ever superstitious
Yes we were. No doubt you've heard
Lighting fag's with only one match
Not one there would be the third
If it was the very last match
To be found in the Brigade
Out it went, when it lit two fag's
You'ld light yours from a Chums fag.

Once again I see a Dug out
Lying there partly inside
I can see again a Tommie
Who had got so far, then died
He had used his small field dressing
Done his best his life to save
But grim death had been the victor
His life. For England Gave

He had kept a little treasure
From one at home so Dear
Just a little picture Postcard
With Roses, all so clear
And the verse that was upon it
Told its message plain and true
Made me think of her in England
Read the verse and so will you.

Somewhere a heart is waiting
Waiting Dear for you
Somewhere a silent memr'y long's
For your Love so true
Somewhere a heart is waiting
Love is not in vain
For the sunshine will break through the clouds one day
When your Heart is mine again

She is one like many hundreds
Watched. Waited Prayed in vain
For the one's they loved out yonder
The one's that there will remain
When at times the clouds are darkest
When the sunshine is denied
God Bless the Homes and Loved ones
Of all those. That Fought and Died

There's one scene that wants forgeting
That's my last day with the Guns
We were putting up a barrage
And the shells were fired by ton's
We were working hard and steady
My old Chum close by my side
When a shell burst in amongst us
My Chum. He fell. He died

It knocked out half the Battery
Some of them, to rise no more
And the others I can't describe it
They were battered cut and tore
I can see my poor old Comrade
Lying Dead. Just as he fell
Then they lift him very gently
From off. The old Gun's trail

I can hear the young 'Subs' order
Cool and calm as on parade
Carry on the barrage Boy's
Then things began to fade
I can hear the old Gun answer
As she fires her eighteen pound
With a roar of cold defiance
I had fired my final round

I can see that first aid station
Once again I feel the pain
Now I'm in that Arny lorrie
Thoughts of Blighty once again
Now I'm at the Clearing Station
Where they cleaned me up a bit
Where they marked me operation
'Cause old Jerry made a hit

Now I'm on that rough old railway
In a truck that goes pell mell
How it jerk's it jar's it rattles
How I wish the Hun's to Hell
Once again I see that Angel
Just a girl. A Red Cross Nurse
O t'was good the way she helped me
I was glad that shell did burst

I can see again that table
Where they put me off to sleep
When I awake. I think I'm dreaming
I'm bewildered fogged complete
I can hear a rumble rumble
What it is I cant explain
For you see. While still unconscious
They had put me in a Train

"Le Treport" " Hotel Trianion"
Seems as though the world is dead.
Yesterday. Was in a barrage
Here today And in a bed
I can see that smiling Sister
Hear her whisper near my cheek
You're for Blighty in the morning
What a Night seemed like a week

Just content I'm traveling Homeward
Labeled. in a Red Cross Train
What a feeling cant describe it
Dont care if there's Snow or Rain
Did I like old France and Belgium
I dont know, there is a doubt
Seem's to me I must have liked it
Would not walk, was carried out

There she lay. A Castle Liner
"Carrisbroke Castle" is her name
What a load of human wreckage
Torn and battered blind and lame
Passenger's she'd carried thousands
Titlled Folks. On pleasure bent
But they never found the pleasure
As that load to Blighty went

I can see there at Southampton
Wounded Tommies what a sight
Row and Row we lay on stretchers
Then was parted left and right
Once again I'm down at Netley
Quite contented, in a bed
Thanking God for all his mercies
No 160910 Ted

I see one scene that's cheerfull
Of those scenes of far away
It is those Red Cross Nurses
Working for us night and day
How they worked to ease our trouble
Though at times well nigh faged out
Yet they always came up smiling
What it cost them There's no doubt

For it needs a lot of courage
To keep a smiling face
But they knew it was a tonic
Helped us each, in our life's race
With their cheerie words of comfort
And their many acts to please
It was to them a pleasure
When they put us at our ease.

God Bless. The Red Cross Nurses
Is many a Tommies prayer
To us they were like Angels
As we lay helpless over there
And when a case was hopeless
When nought could save a life
They soothed the last few moments
As Mother would Or Wife

Now you know why I'm restless
My mind will keep wandering back
To the days in Trenches and Dug outs
On Duck Boards and the Wooden Track
Again I hear "Battery". " Action"
The S.O.S. signal shows bright
The roar of the Guns I hear them
As they answer that signal of light

At night time when it is quiet
Directly I close my eye's
In the dark. Those scene's
Real visions that float slowly by
Now I feel tired and weary
I think that I shall soon sleep
O would'nt it be a pleasure
To sleep very sound and deep

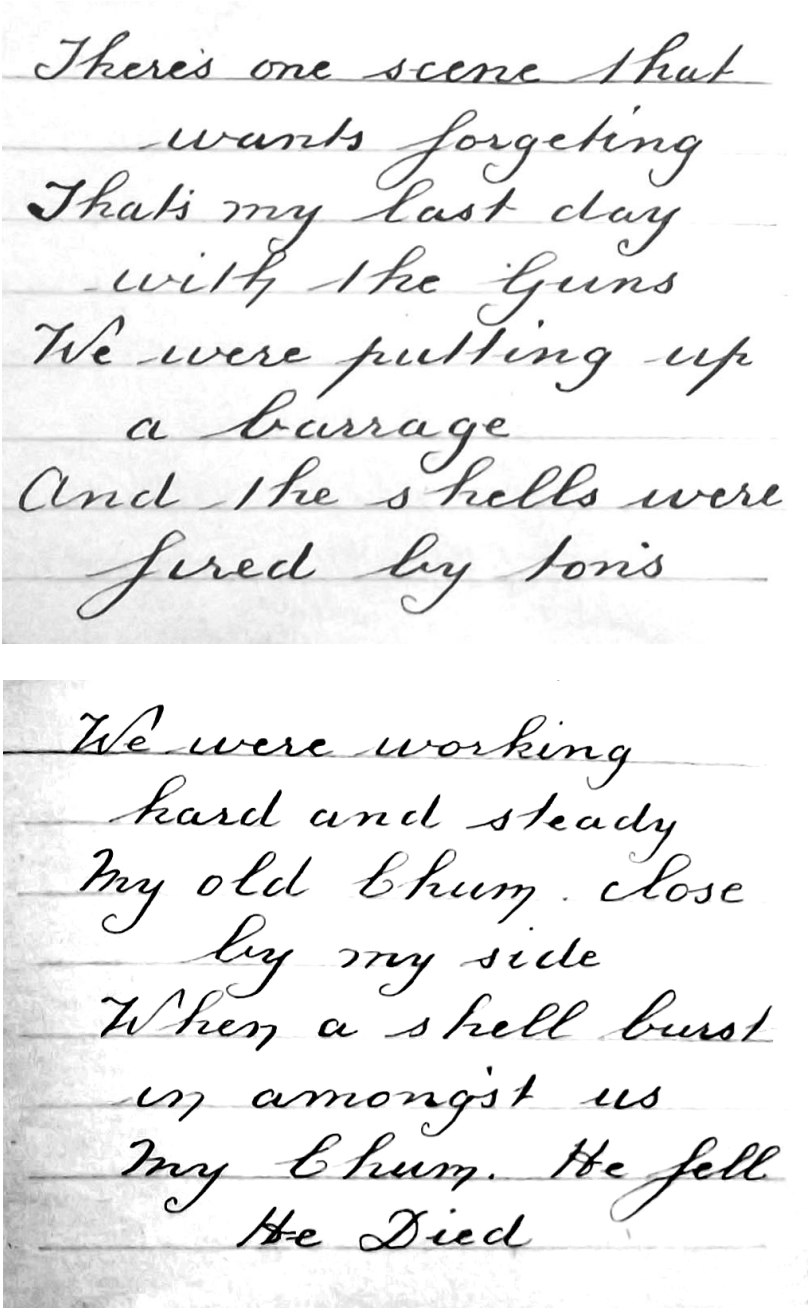
It is said our nerves are shaken
Its no wonder. T'was a strain
I hope that I shall never
Hear of scene's like that again
There are times I can't forget them
But Nil. desperandum I say
For time will be the healer
If we live in Hope and Pray

*Sub.

The following explanation of the composition of a gun battery has been provided by the Imperial War Museum:

This refers to Royal Artillery battery sub units; a subsection consisted of a single gun and limber drawn by six horses (with three drivers), eight gunners (riding on the limber or mounted on their own horses), and an ammunition wagon also drawn by six horses (with three drivers).

The fact that these batteries have alphabetical designations rather than numerical, suggests these are Royal Horse Artillery (RHA). A RHA battery had six 13-pounder field guns and included 5 officers and 200 men.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wants forgeting
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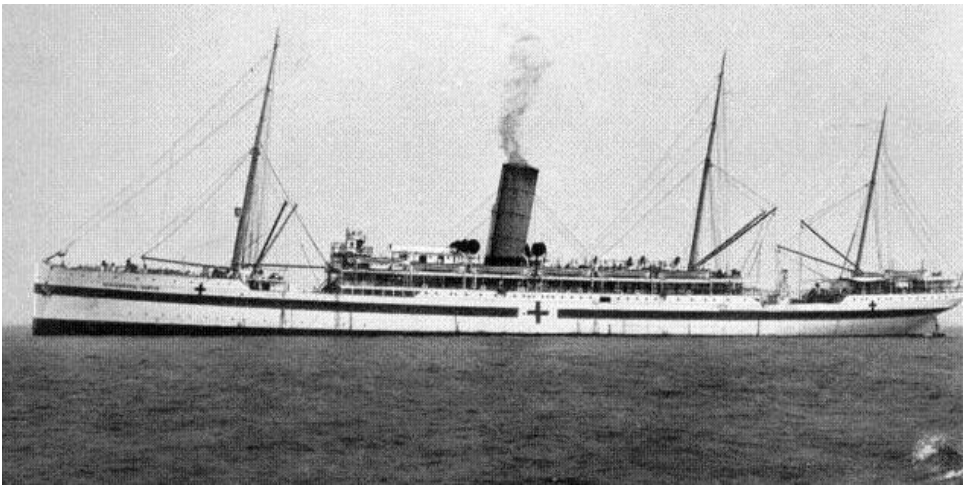
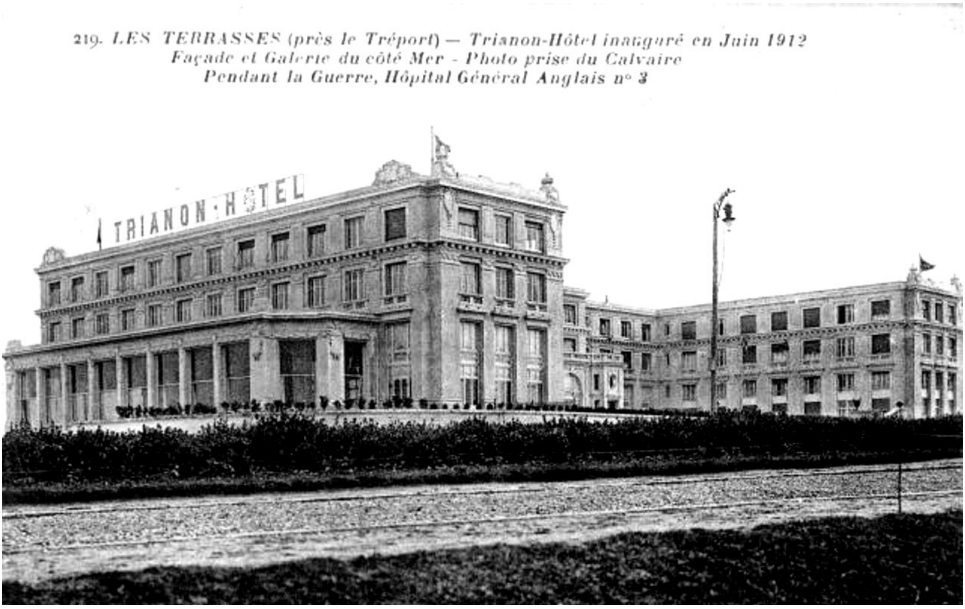
with the Guns
We were putting up
a barrage
And the shells were
fired by tons

We were working
hard and steady
my old Chum close
by my side
When a shell burst
in amongst us
my Chum. He fell
He Died

Sample of Edward Till's original handwriting



The *Carisbrook Castle* as a hospital ship in 1915. This Union Castle liner was commandeered two days before the formal declaration of war in 1914. Fitted with 439 beds she crossed the English Channel bringing wounded troops home from the Western Front.


219. LES TERRASSES (près le Tréport) — Trianon-Hôtel inauguré en Juin 1912
Façade et Galerie du côté Mer - Photo prise du Calvaire
Pendant la Guerre, Hôpital Général Anglais n° 3
TRIANON-HOTEL

The Trianon Hotel at Le Tréport which became General Hospital No. 3 for Canadian and British wounded during WW1.

When I pass by the War Memorial
Just one glance my mind wanders back
I can see the mud, the slush, the shell holes,
the duck boards, the old track.

I can see my fallen Old Comrades
And although I know they are dead
I can hear them whisper
Remember your Old Pals 'neath Poppies so Red'.

Words written by Edward George Till.